

THE NATIONAL FOOD SUPPLY

The serious increase in the price of food and the fear of continued shortage in supplies have done more to make people think about the land question than any amount of fact and argument in books, speeches and pamphlets could do. We are learning by experience what the decline in British agriculture means. While we are looking anxiously to remote parts of the world to deliver their harvests and make bread cheap once more, the thought is growing that it is strange we should be so largely dependent upon farmers thousands of miles away. We are beginning to wonder why it is that we cannot be fed from the produce of land nearer home, and rely on the ripening crops of our own fields to make our food supplies more plentiful. Our present position is so precarious that we dare not contemplate the prospect of a total suspension of our overseas commerce now or at any time; and to force open one sea-route alone, we advance as one of the chief reasons the necessity of getting food. Whatever important military or diplomatic issues may be at stake it has been given forth that one material object of a costly expedition, involving a tremendous sacrifice of human lives, is to liberate large stores of corn which have long been waiting shipment to the British market. Accordingly, some part of the expenditure of this undertaking must be set down as the gruesome price we have to pay for a neglected countryside and for our inability or our refusal to make better use of the land within our own shores.

Some may say and do say that if the countryside is neglected, the neglect is not due to purpose or design. It is not intentional. The cause lies in the impossibility of growing food at a price that will compare favourably with the price at which it can be imported. All this would be true if those who make such assertions could show that there was no obstacle whatever to anyone trying to get his living on the land who wished to do so, or that all farmers were getting the best possible results now, or that poor soil was the reason some fields and often great tracts of country are altogether deserted by the labour of man. But none of these assertions can be established. On the contrary, writers like Prince Kropotkin and Professor Long, whose authority is unquestioned, prove to a demonstration that the soil of Great Britain could produce many times the quantity of foodstuffs it now produces, providing a happy and contented existence for many millions of our population now crowded together in cities; and that no reason can be found to explain the contrast between uncultivated fields in the hands of one man while near by another man can get record results on his land—except that law or custom or privilege forbids better use in the first case.

Kropotkin sums up the matter in a sentence: "The British nation does not work on her soil; she is prevented from doing so." If there are permanent obstacles actually preventing the people from using the land, is it not highly ridiculous to take the present state of affairs for granted, to see nothing but natural tendencies in the steady decrease in the number of persons engaged in agriculture, and to accept as inevitable the laying down of more and more land to pasture? It is for us to examine the obstacles that exist before we admit that no one can profitably compete with imported garden produce raised outside the gates of Paris or with imported butter made in distant Siberia.

If a British citizen desires to grow food, the first obstacle he meets with is a landowner who may refuse the use of the land altogether, or if he consents he must have his free share of the produce although he does nothing but look on. His only function is to collect rent. He may impose terms on his tenant which restrict the use of the land and arbitrarily forbid anything in the nature of intensive culture. It is, for instance, a universal practice to let

land only under the condition that it may be used only for grazing, or as a prairie "ranch," and with a clause in the lease prohibiting the plough being put into the ground. Yet it is maintained that the decline of agriculture is due to natural and unavoidable causes! The further contention, that cattle raising and the production of milk and dairy produce have taken the place of crops is disproved by the absence of any appreciable increase in the numbers of live-stock. And now as we write, in addition to the fears of scarcity of corn, an official warning has been issued, that there will be a shortage of meat unless meat eaters economise their consumption. All departments of agriculture are in a state of stagnation, whereas under just conditions all might flourish.

The autocratic powers of the landowner are not the only obstacle preventing the best use of the land. Anyone who does manage to rent or buy ground which the landowner consents to let go finds he is burdened with heavier rates and taxes the more industrious he is and the more produce he raises. Every improvement in the way of buildings or better cultivation increases the amount he has to pay in public revenues.

Taxation is placed on his shoulders, but anyone who holds land out of use or prevents it from being put to its best use (which is the same thing) enjoys exemption from taxation no matter how valuable such idle or neglected land may be. Every parish in the country can provide notorious examples of the way in which this one-sided law operates in favour of the idle monopolist and penalises the enterprise of the hard-working farmer, cultivator, or market gardener. It is a vicious principle to tax and rate land at only half-a-crown an acre while land close by having no greater capacity or no superior fertility is taxed up to four or five or even ten pounds an acre. The authorities we have named can quote cases where previously idle land, seemingly worth nothing, can give a return in produce equal to £100 or £200 per acre. A man who could achieve such success deserves the diploma which Professor Long says it is the custom to give to cultivators in France when they set an example in the way of brilliant results to the rest of the countryside. Prizes would be the natural reward for diligence and skill, but the law dispenses punishment instead of prizes. A farmer or market gardener who took land previously rated at half-a-crown per acre and made it more productive by his work and improvements would have his rent raised against him and his rates and taxes would be multiplied. But *only* against him. All the land in his neighbourhood would be rated at half-a-crown as before, but his success would stiffen the price or the rent against new-comers. Speculation sets in and places a serious obstacle against further progress.

The decline of British agriculture can only be arrested if these obstacles are removed. The landowners' privilege and power would be destroyed if he was rated on the value which attaches to the bare land. The industry of the cultivator would give the cultivator his just reward if it ceased to be rated and taxed by this unjust law. All the great possibilities of which books on farming paint glowing pictures would be realised and with them would come a revolution in social conditions. While shot and shell are smashing the forts and armies which hold up Russian corn and prevent bread from being baked, it is well that we should concentrate attention upon the greater barrier at home which law and privilege and monopoly place against every attempt to bring British corn and British food into the market.

The present position is intolerable and must cry aloud for redress. The British land system is an anachronism which must be swept out of existence if we would solve the food problem, the housing problem, and all the social evils due to the divorce of the British people from their natural inheritance.

A. W. M.